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TOPONYMIC DATA FILES: DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Report of the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers

Paper submitted by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names**

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The Working Group convened during the fifteenth session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names in Geneva in November 1991. Those participating discussed what they felt should be the prime objectives of this group, to further the development of computerized toponymic records meeting acceptable standards, to promote compatible data structures, to facilitate toponymic data exchange, and to encourage the use of this information in national gazetteer publication programmes.

1. The first task quite clearly became the collection of information on toponymic databases existing in various Member States. A questionnaire was planned to determine what types of toponymic databases (digital and analogue) exist; what information is included and how it is gathered and updated; and, if databases are computerized, how the information is stored and disseminated. Ms. Mattisson of the National Land Survey of Sweden spearheaded the development of a suitable questionnaire. After input from Working Group members, this questionnaire was forwarded to the United Nations Secretariat in March (1992), for wide distribution (in English, French and Spanish) to national geographical names and mapping authorities. Early replies will be gathered into a preliminary report. Later responses are still very much needed so that the Working Group can use the information to develop suitable recommendations to present to the Group of Experts, for the benefit of all States Members of the United Nations. The information from the questionnaires will provide a valuable inventory of existing toponymic databases and system configurations and will be used:

(a) To assist those who need to develop automated toponymic databases;

(b) To cooperate on common data fields to be universally maintained (i.e. stored and updated);

(c) To collaborate to develop practical mechanisms for exchange of toponymic data between national databases;

(d) To work towards the acceptance and general use of international standards for data storage and exchange;

(e) To encourage the use of national toponymic databases for national gazetteer programmes.

2. For the initial development of many toponymic databases a PC-based system is ideal. The Working Group recommended that:

(a) Guidelines on database development, already prepared by some members of the Group of Experts for various toponymic courses be made widely available. These would be particularly valuable if they could be used on personal computers (PCs).

(b) One or more database packages be developed and made available (with no copyright restrictions) so that any Member State might take advantage of

simple menu-driven routines for developing a toponymic database to handle their own names records.

3. The Working Group recommends that training courses offered in toponymy and concerned with the development of national geographical names programmes and world standardization should contain, at least, a basic workshop on digital databases, their development and maintenance.

The role of the Working Group, in the immediate future, will be to evaluate the database questionnaire responses, from which recommendations should be made to address the common issues of assistance, cooperation, standards development and gazetteer production programmes, as noted above. Increased effort should be put into the creation of database packages which can be the foundation for Member States to set up their own computerized toponymic data files. Already existing guidelines on database development should be collected and made as widely available as possible.